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ABSTRACT

The paper outlines a theoretical framework through which teacher attitudes may be viewed, then examines research and literature on the public's, peers', and teachers' attitudes toward handicapped populations. The practical application of the theoretical considerations and strategies for insuring positive teacher attitudes are offered. Among the models considered are communication models, forced compliance, self confrontation techniques, and early socialization. Finally, a futuristic look at attitudes and their impact on special needs students is presented. (Author/SBH)

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TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS: FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE CONFERENCE
ON THE NEW ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATORS
IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF HANDICAPPED
DISADVANTAGE STUDENTS

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TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS*: FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Although many definitions of the term, attitude, exist, most social psychologists would agree to Thurstone's (1946) definition: "The intensity of positive or negative affect for or against a psychological object." Of what value, then, is it to study attitudes toward handicapped learners? We study attitudes as a short cut to understanding one's behavior toward a particular object referent. Another answer to this question can be found in the fact that special educators generally agree that attitudes toward the handicapped are of significance because of their potential influence on 1) the development and provision of programs for the handicapped, 2) how these programs are delivered, 3) local, state and federal legislative enactments, 4) individual and collective litigation, 5) behavioral reactions of others to the handicapped (Goffman, 1963), 6) the self-esteem of the handicapped individual, and 7) the general quality of life of the handicapped.

Recent changes in the system of special education and the larger society and the resultant increased integration of handicapped individuals into community based programs (deinstitutionalization) and regular classroom/vocational programs (mainstreaming) provide us with examples of the effect that public and teachers' attitudes play in service delivery and success. Undoubtedly, the extent to which these programs are accepted and successful will be determined, in a large part, by the attutudes of the community residents and those of the regular/vocational

*For the purposes of this paper, special needs students are operationally defined as mildly mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed and the learning disabled.

classroom teachers and students, respectively. Thus, those communities which assume that handicapped persons can function as independent, productive residents of the neighborhood will be more likely to accept a community-based program and work towards its success. The same logic holds for public school mainstreaming programs.

The body of this paper is divided into four sections. The paper will initially outline a theoretical framework through which teacher attitudes may be viewed then proceed to examine public, peers' and teachers' attitudes toward handicapped populations. The practical application of the theoretical considerations and strategies and suggestions for insuring positive teacher attitudes will be offered in the third section. The final section of this paper covers a futuristic look at attitudes and their impact on special needs students.

TOWARD A THEORETICAL SCHEMA

Guskin (1977) has suggested that the theoretical frameworks underlying most attitude research, whether within or outside the field of special education, may be categorized into four broad classes: psychodynamic, sociological, cognitive consistency (balance theory Heider, 1958; dissonance theory, Festinger, 1957), and behavioral. This paper will be guided by theoretical formulations derived from the social psychological literature related to attitude, deviance, stigma and labeling theory. Social psychological theory hypothesizes that the role of the handicapped consists of the behavior expected of persons occupying the status of handicapped and that attitudes toward the handicapped are a function of a perceived threat to the social order; and that such labeling will lead the handicapped to behavior consistent with others' role expectations (Guskin, 1977; Mercer, 1973). Of course most theoretical formulations are not neat and pure so that this paper will additionally draw up selected

Any consideration of attitudes toward the handicapped should include a systematic examination of several essential classes of variables. These variables consist of 1) a temporal construct, 2) the severity of handicapping condition, 3) the nature and type of handicap, and 4) the nature of the perceiver or holder of an attitude toward the handicapped. A number of ways in which time may enter into investigations have been outlined by Guskin, (1977). Some logical questions include: How long does one hold attitudes towards an individual who has been labeled retarded? Emotionally disturbed? Learning disabled? How have attitudes toward the handicapped as a group changed over the years? Do handicapped individuals' status change over their life time to form a "career" in the role of "retarded person," "emotionally disturbed person," and the like.

The severity, nature, chronological age, and self-perception of the handicapped person logically affects teachers' attitudes and must be considered in any examination of attitudes toward the handicapped. Similarly, the perceiver's sex, age, level of education, socio-economic status (SES) level, and degree of contact with handicapped people, should guide research on attitudes toward handicapped learners. Unfortunately, the systematic control for or incorporation of such invariables in attitude research design is missing in far too many instances. The following consists of a review of the most widely accepted efforts to ascertain attitudes toward the handicapped on the part of the public, peers, and teachers.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE HANDICAPPED

Attitudes like other reality based phenomena do not exist in a vacuum. A more valid and comprehensive understanding of teachers' attitudes toward the handicapped can be determined if these attitudes are placed within the context of those of the lay public and handicapped learners' peers.

Although teachers' attitudes toward handicapped learners differ along certain dimensions, it is this writer's view that they influence and are influenced by attitudes of the public and peers of the handicapped.

There appears to be a paucity of systematic and inventive research designed to measure the lay public's attitudes toward the handicapped. A review of existing attitude literature reveals some rather consistent findings. To illustrate, when attitudes toward disabled persons are compared with attitudes toward nondisabled, an overwhelming amount of research suggests that people perceive the disabled person as being considerably "different" from the nondisabled person (Barker, 1948; Sussmam, 1961). The literature concerning the physically disabled indicates that a physical disability creates an atmosphere of prejudice toward the physically disabled person (Yuker, 1965). The psychologically disabled individual has been found to evoke more unfavorable negative attitudes on the part of employers and family members than his/her physically handicapped counterpart (Olshansky, Grab, and Malamub, 1958). Sarbin and Mancuso (1970) concluded that the general public tends to declare negative (rejecting) valuation on persons diagnosed as mentally ill.

The literature related to the public's attitude toward the mentally retarded also appears to be somewhat consistent. Gottlieb's (1975) review of the literature allows us to make several generalizations. First, most people view the mentally retarded as moderately or severely retarded and as having physical abnormalities (e.g. mongolism, hydrocephaly, etc.), when in reality, the mildly retarded comprise approximately 80% of the retarded population. Goffman's (1963) concept of gestalt of disability partially explains the public's association of a physical abnormality with mental retardation. People often assume that if one is blind, he/she is also hearing impaired and, likewise, if one is mentally retarded he/she is

also physically disabled. Second, attitudes toward "mental retardation" and toward severely retarded individuals are generally negative while attitudes toward individuals labeled as "slow learners" (i.e., the mildly retarded) are more positive. Third, adults do not express favorable attitudes toward mainstreaming severely retarded learners but are generally receptive to mainstreaming mildly retarded learners. Finally, the public is generally ignorant regarding mental retardation and effective programs for the retarded. Physicians do not appear to be immuned to lacking accurate knowledge about mental retardation. Connaughton (1974) found that a substantial minority of general practitioners have serious misunderstandings and very negative attitudes in this area and have been giving inappropriate advice to parents of retarded children.

PEER ATTITUDES TOWARD THE HANDICAPPED

The majority of research on peer attitudes toward the handicapped has been focused on attitudes toward mildly retarded children within a school context (Gottlieb, 1975). A review of these studies reveals that the less intelligent a child is, the less often he is chosen as a friend (Johnson, 1950; Gottlieb, 1975). Similarly, post-mainstreaming peer attitudinal research demonstrates that mainstreamed retarded children are less well accepted by peers than are segregated retarded children (Goodman, Gottlieb, and Garrison, 1972; Iano, Ayers, Heller, McGettigan and Walker, 1974). Both Johnson (1950) and Gottlieb (1976) suggest that the retarded learner's antisocial behavior is the reason for his/her rejection. If further research confirms this assumption, then it is apparent that prospective mainstreamed retarded learners require training in developing socioculturally acceptable modes of behavior.

TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARD THE HANDICAPPED

The basic providers of educational services for handicapped learners

are, of course, classroom teachers. A body of literature, albeit inconclusive, regarding teacher attitudes toward the handicapped exists. Semmel (1959) and Alper and Retish (1972) found that special education teachers did not have more favorable attitudes toward the mentally retarded than general education teachers. Additionally, elementary education teachers possessed significantly more negative attitudes toward the retarded after completion of student teaching (Alper and Retish, 1972). Contact with mentally retarded learners did not appear to improve teacher attitudes in the foregoing studies.

As previously mentioned, the success of any programs designed to maximally integrate eligible handicapped learners into regular classrooms is largely dependent upon the attitudes of regular classroom teachers. To illustrate, it has been argued that teachers' attitudes may be transmitted to the child and that, these in turn, will influence the child's learning and/or social status among his/her peer group (Lapp, 1975). Similarly, Yuker (1965) found that the recognition of a disability evokes negative and rejecting attitudes toward the disabled which subsequently may lead to avoidance of the disabled person by the nondisabled. If Yuker's findings hold true for mainstream classrooms, one would expect regular classroom teachers to avoid labeled mainstreamed handicapped learners. The pedogogical and training implications of this possibility are apparent.

Several studies have addressed attitudes of teachers toward mainstreamed handicapped learners. Shotel, Iano, and McGettigan (1972) studied regular class teachers' attitudes toward learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, and mildly retarded children in resource room programs or segregated self-contained special classes. They found that 1) of the control group, only 7.3% of the teachers favored regular class placement for retarded, even though the placement would be supported by a re-

source room program, 2) teachers' attitudes toward the integration of mildly retarded children in regular classrooms became significantly more negative as the regular class teachers gained experience with the retarded children (i.e., the percentage of favorable attitudes toward integration dropped from 37.3% to 13.6% after one year), and 3) after one year of resource room programming almost three times as many teachers favored regular class placement for emotionally disturbed children then for mentally retarded. In a related study, Combs and Harper (1967) observed that labeled mentally retarded received less favorable attitudes than children labeled cerebral palsey, schizophrenia, and so.

To the contrary, Jones and Gottfried (1962) reported that a higher proportion of regular class teachers expressed preference for teaching mildly retarded children than emotionally disturbed children. Also, Guerin and Szatlocky (1974) indicated that 62% of the teachers they interviewed expressed positive attitudes toward integrating the mildly retarded, 19% expressed neutral attitudes, and 19% expressed negative attitudes.

More systematic and targeted research on teachers' attitudes toward the handicapped is sorely needed. However, eligible mildly handicapped learners are being increasingly mainstreamed into regular classroom programs. We do not have the good fortune to delay, until equivocal research findings, designing programs or offering strategies and suggestions for effecting positive regular class teachers' attitudes toward the handicapped. The need for action presently exists and must be satisfied.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Handicapped learners form a set of the larger universe of society's devalued individuals. Negative or unfavorable attitudes expressed toward the handicapped population closely parallel those expressed towards blacks, poor people and other individuals placed in devalued roles and statures

by society. Much of the discussion to follow is borrowed from attitude change research involving racial or ethnic attitudes. Most of the ideas and strategies offered, however, will be applicable to affecting positive change in teachers' attitudes toward handicapped learners.

Change is only initiated through discussion but manifested through positive action and continuous reflection upon that action. Ashmore (1975) has indicated that although there are a host of published attitude-change studies and programs, the strategies used to bring about positive change can be reduced to three general paradigms: 1) the communication paradigm, 2) the forced compliance, counter-attitudinal role playing paradigm, and 3) the self-confrontation model. A brief explication of each will precede the offering of specific strategies.

Communication Models--Mass Media and Education Program

The communications models are of two type, mass media campaigns to reduce prejudice and educational programs to alter attitudes. Large scale mass media programs have been found to be ineffective unless certain safeguards are met and specific components built into them (Ashmore, 1975). Freedman and Sears (1965), and McGuire (1969) offer the following considerations for developing an effective mass media campaign to reduce negative attitudes toward the handicapped:

- During the initial stages of forming an opinion or when commitment to the opinion is low positive information should be reported, i.e., information campaigns should stress the strengths, abilities, potentialities, etc. of the handicapped individual.
- Mass media campaigns can be enhanced by identifying opinion leaders within the target population and enlisting their help in planning and carrying out the campaign.
- Mass media campaigns should be used as an adjunct to comprehensive efforts to reduce prejudice toward handicapped learners.

Educational programs designed to change behavior (e.g., a symposium, lecture, course, movie, study group, interpersonal relations session, and the like) have been numerous with a reported success-failure ratio of 2.1 (Ashmore, 1970). Based upon the limited and confounded research in this area three suggestions will be offered.

- Attitude change is maximized when the course or program instructor believes in or at least understands and accepts the position being advocated.
- The selection of an instructor who has a positive affective relationship with his/her students will increase the likelihood of an effective attitude change program.
- The target group for a particular program must be carefully identified and the program specifically geared to this group.

Forced Compliance

The second model, forced compliance, can be conceptualized along two typologies 1) role playing and 2) enforced contact. In role playing the target person is asked to write an essay, make a speech, or enact a dramatic role which espouses an egalitarian or non-prejudiced position. Two conditions which appear to strengthen the effectiveness of role playing are: 1) perceived choice: the more choice the target group has to engage in the counter-attitudinal role playing, the greater the attitude change, and 2) perceived consequences: the more important the role playing is perceived to be, the greater the attitude change (Collins and Hoyt, 1972).

The latter forced compliance typology, enforced contact, involves bringing the target person into direct, personal contact with outgroup members under conditions thought to be conducive to attitude change (Ashmore, 1975). A review of this research, however, has indicated that contact can often heighten conflict and reinforce prejudices unless several factors are considered (Amir, 1969; and Ashmore, 1970). These factors will

be offered in the form of suggestions along with strategies which have grown out of role playing research.

- Teachers can participate in a psychodrama in which they advocate the integration of handicapped learners (e.g., mildly and moderately retarded, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled) into regular classroom programs.
- Teachers may write an essay advocating the placement of handicapped persons into meaningful and productive employment.
- Allow target group teachers to freely elect to participate in the counter-attitudinal role playing exercise.
- Attach some importance to the role playing activity, (e.g., "the role player's essay will be used as a part of the curriculum report going to the superintendent of schools").

In the area of enforced contact the following strategies are offered:

- The target group and outgroup (handicapped) should cooperatively work toward shared goals and should share task responsibility for achieving these goals. Handicapped individuals should be given positions or duties of maximal possible responsibility and not simply be recipients of help.
- Outgroup persons should not all occupy low status positions.
- The total environment (administrative instructional, etc.) surrounding the contact situation should be philosophically supportive of contact and tolerance.
- The contact situation should be as rewarding as possible or if the contact group is unsuccessful the failure should not be linked to performance deficits of the outgroup.
- The contact situation should allow the participants to exchange personal information and develop friendships (Cook, 1970).
- At least some significant proportion of outgroup members in the contact situation must not conform to stereotypical behavior.

Self-Confrontation Techniques

Self-confrontation techniques comprise the last model of attitude

change. Katz, et. al. (1956) have suggested that if negative attitudes are rooted in personality needs and results from displacement and projection then negative attitudes can be reduced by giving teachers insight into their use of irrational defense mechanisms. Two logical suggestions for teacher attitude change are made:

- Teachers can engage in values clarification, self-insight exercises where they 1) rank order a list of values, and 2) become aware of their tendency to place a higher value on their own freedom than on those of others (Rokeach, 1973).

- Videotape interactions between handicapped and non-handicapped individuals and present these tapes to the non-handicapped individuals together with an interpretation of how their behavior influences that of the handicapped individual in the interaction. (This suggestion if based upon research which indicates that non-handicapped individuals appear to feel uncomfortable in the presence of handicappped persons and may engage in conscious or unconscious behavior which hinders the development and maintenance of cognitive and affective skills by the handicapped.)

Early Socialization

There is a considerable body of literature which suggests that basic orientations or attitudes are formed during childhood and that these orientations shape how we react to later learning experiences (Ashmore, 1975). Accordingly, teachers may be wise to take advantage of the early socialization stages of children and design programs aimed at developing positive attitudes toward handicapped persons. A pilot program developed by Frazier (1977) offers direction in this regard. The program is designed to work with pre-school to adult age non-handicapped children in creating positive attitudes toward handicapped persons. In this program the handicap is de-emphasized and in its stead a focus is placed upon the strengths and abilities of the handicapped individuals. Also, the similarities and individual differences shared by all individuals are highlighted. This particular program could serve as a model upon which comprehensive pro-

grams might be developed. Additional strategies for working with young non-handicapped children consist of the following:

- Learning experiences and curricula should expose children to a wide variety of human capabilities and existence.
- Learning experiences and curricula should counter the tendency to believe that differences are anxiety arousing and bad and should increase children's tolerance for differences.
- Learning experiences should allow children to implement the general principle of sympathy in specific situations

TEACHER ATTITUDES AND THE FUTURE

Our understanding of teacher attitudes toward the handicapped has been woefully inadequate. Surely additional research is needed with regard to teachers' attitudes toward the handicapped. Some possible foci of this research include 1) an examination of the content of attitudes toward the handicapped, 2) attention to reasons why regular class teachers harbor negative attitudes or unfavorable attitudes toward the handicapped, 3) closer examination of the relationship of attitudes toward the handicapped and operant behavior toward them, 4) creative explorations designed to determine the manner in which handicapped learners internalize the behavior of others, 5) inventive determinations of the specific kinds of behavior in which handicapped persons engage which evoke negative attitudes on the part of perceivers of the handicapped, and 6) studies which address the possible differential effects or attitudes of various categories of labeled handicapped persons.

Existing attitude research has employed fairly traditional, inflexible research methodology. Future research in this area hopefully will be guided by more flexible research methodology which would employ systems approaches and naturalistic techniques in gathering data related to attitudes and attitude change. The use of unstructured observations, prolonged, natural contact with the handicapped and their perceivers, and

and the involvement of subjects in the observation and analysis process offer hope in increasing our understanding of teachers' attitudes toward the handicapped. Teachers' attitudes toward the handicapped will continue to play a significant role in the total development of handicapped and non-handicapped learners. Sound theoretical formulations which provide the basis on which effective programs can be developed must emerge. Let us begin.

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